



# **31 PLANES OF EXISTENCE**

**SUVANNO MAHATHERA**

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**BY**  
**SUVANNO MAHATHERA**

31 Planes of Existence By Suvanno Mahathera.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the main tenets in the Buddha's Teachings is that all things happen due to a cause. In the context of birth and death, these two phenomena are actually one process. Death is followed by immediate rebirth in accordance with a law known as the Law of Causality. Death signals the end of a phase of kamma and at that point the beginning of the next phase of kamma gives immediate rebirth in another plane of existence as dictated by the quality of the kamma arising at that moment in time. I can do no better than to append herewith some pertinent writings by Anagarika Sugatananda (Francis Story) on the spirit world in introducing "The Thirty-One Planes of Existence" by Venerable Bhante Suvanno.

"In accordance with the universal Law of Causality, death is followed by immediate rebirth in one of the thirty-one planes of existence as a result of previous kamma. That is to say, a being arises in the appropriate sphere to which past conscious actions and habitual tendencies culminating in the "death-proximate kamma", or last conscious thought-moment, have led him. If his actions of the three types (mental, physical and vocal, manifesting in thought, action and speech) have been directed by a purified consciousness, he will re-manifest in a higher plane or **Brahma-loka**; if they have been of mixed type he will be reborn in one of the intermediate spheres of the **kama-loka** (world of desire or sensory gratification). If his kamma has been predominantly bad, with a strong reflex at the moment of death, he will be reborn in what are called the **Duggatti** (unhappy) states, including the world of earthbound spirits or **peta-loka**. The death-proximate kamma is an important factor in deciding the immediate rebirth. It may be good or bad, but whichever it is, it tends to be the state of mind characteristic of the individual in his previous life, which takes possession of his last moments of consciousness before it leaves the body. Thus a person whose predominant characteristic is a mental attitude of hate will at once remanifest in a form embodying his hatred, as that is his death-proximate kamma, induced by habitual past thoughts. If he has cultivated **Metta** and **Karuna** (benevolence and sympathy) it is that

consciousness that will arise in a higher plane where these characteristics manifest.

The most common type of habitual consciousness is neither of active love nor active hatred, but desire (*tanha*). It is desire and attachment that bind the individual to the wheel of **Samsara**. They provide the motives of all activities: hatred and love themselves arise from the root cause of desire; love towards the object of attraction, hatred when the desire is thwarted. Most kamma, therefore, is of a mixed type and its effects alternate in the experiences of the future life in the **kama-loka**. The world wherein we now find ourselves is in the kama-loka, as it is one of the spheres dominated by desire and sensual attachment.

The highest doctrine (of the Buddha) teaches the basic truth of **anatta**, which means that even in the earthly life-continuity of the individual there is no persistent or unchanging entity. All things are in a condition of flux; a causal continuum of successive thought-moments and material conformations arising and passing away in obedience to the Law of Dependent Origination. That which is developed by mental discipline and spiritual purification is not a personality, but a tendency. An infant carries the latent tendencies of the past existence and the seeds of the future life before it; but the child of five is not the same personality as the subsequent boy of fifteen or man of fifty. Body, mind and all the elements will have changed many times between these stages of the individual's life. When we allude to them as the same 'person' we are only using a necessary convention; there is no identity linking the child of five, the boy of fifteen and the man of fifty. There is only a causal continuity; because the child existed the man exists, and his 'personality' is the aggregate of his thoughts, words, actions and experiences during the intervening period. It is the function of memory alone which gives this causal-continuum an appearance of being an identical personality continuous in time. When age, or any organic alteration of the physical brain, causes the faculties to decay, further changes of character or personality arises, this time caused solely through change in the material structure of the body. This is further explained in the Buddhist doctrine of **anicca**(impermanence of all phenomena).

We are in a better position to understand what actually takes place at death and rebirth. The being that is reborn bears the same relationship; a causal one, to the being of the previous life as the boy of fifteen does to the child of five, or the man of fifty to the boy of fifteen. It is the same 'person' only in the sense that the one carries on the cause-effect current of the other. To use a familiar illustration: if we knew a boy of fifteen and then lost sight of him until he reached the age of fifty, we should find scarcely anything by which to recognise him. Unless he bore some unusual physical characteristic of a kind to endure all his life, even his own mother would not be able to identify him.

A section of the Buddhist scriptures, the **Peta Vatthu**, describes the state of those reborn in the **Duggatti** spheres, and how they can be helped by the living. The word '**Peta!**' may be roughly translated as 'ghost', though it is related to the Sanskrit **Pitri**, meaning ancestor. In the **Peta Vatthu** it is shown that those reborn in the spirit world nearest the earth-plane often have an inferior type of consciousness to that with which they were equipped in their previous existence. Far from having access to wider realms of knowledge... they re-manifest with a limited consciousness and intellect, with imperfect memory of the past life, and inhabiting a vague, indeterminate half-world. At the same time because of their strong attraction to the sphere they have left, their contacts with it are relatively easier and more frequent than those of beings in the higher **lokas**. In a sense, they exist side by side with the 'living'; the step between their place and ours is only small and one easily taken by the psychically-sensitive.

It is from these beings that the trivial messages and meaningless phenomena emanate. They have not the same 'personality' they had on earth, but retain only the accumulated characteristics most predominant in that personality. This condition prevails until that particular kamma-resultant is exhausted, when they are reborn once again in the ceaseless round of **samsara**, from which final escape is only possible through the realisation of Nibbana.

On the human (manussa) level of the **kama-loka** there is pain and pleasure, good and evil, hatred and love. It is the sphere of opposites, from which we, as free agents, have to make our own choices for the fulfillment of our

evolution. All the *lokas* must be regarded as planes of consciousness which are attainable... in the physical body.

In effect while still on earth we can raise ourselves to the plane of our choice and will inevitably remanifest there when the term of earthly existence is ended. But any law, to be a true universal principle, must operate both ways; we cannot logically expect the cosmic law to work only in our favour. If it did, there would be no point in man's freedom of choice in moral issues. Where it is open to man to go upward, forward, it must be open to him to descend in the scale of spiritual evolution also.

Greed, hatred, sensuality and inertia all have their appropriate spheres of manifestation and their corresponding corporeal forms. When these types of consciousness arise more frequently than their spiritual opposites of generosity, love, purity and energy, they create the form of the next birth. It is at death that the Jekyll and Hyde metamorphosis takes outward effect, not by any process of transmigration, or passing of a soul from one body to another, but in accordance with the subtle and universal law of causality that rules the cosmos.... The lower planes of the spirit world are peopled by creatures imperfect in form and sub-human in the intellect, the direct result of misuse of their faculties during earthly life. Spirits such as these linger about the places with which they were associated in life, drawn thither by the strong force of attachment, and they are able to make use of psychically defenceless persons to make their contact with the world for which they crave. Themselves living in a dim and cheerless world, they seek to share the life they once knew, as a cold and homeless traveller looks with longing into a warm and comfortable room, where friends are seated round a glowing fire.

Impermanence is the inherent nature of all conditions and neither suffering nor heavenly happiness last forever. In time the kamma that produces them runs its course and another phase of existence is entered. So the state of these unhappy beings is only temporary. Far from having greater knowledge and power than human beings, they have less and the teaching of Buddhism is that they should be regarded with compassion. They can be helped by the loving thoughts of the living and good deeds done in their names can, if they take advantage of the opportunity offered, by rejoicing in these deeds,

alleviate their unhappiness. The method of doing this -by psychic dedication - is also fully dealt with in the Pali commentaries and is regularly practised in all Buddhist countries.” (*Francis Story; The Light of the Dhamma Vol.1*)

Francis Story, an eminent student of Buddhism, and the description of the “31 Planes” by the Venerable Acara Suvanno Mahathera should serve to answer some questions regarding the relationship of birth and death in the Buddha’s cosmology.

In the Chinese tradition of reckoning age, the Venerable Acara Suvanno Mahathera will be 82 in this year of 2001. From the age of 12 he has been practising the Buddha’s Teachings; progressing gradually and painstakingly until today, where he finds himself immersed totally in the nitty-gritty of teaching the Dhamma to one and sundry as and when the demand falls on him. These constant and sometimes urgent demands on his time (sometimes the demand can come as early as 2.00 am, as when there is a knock on his door and he is called to the bedside of a dying devotee to chant for the favourable rebirth of said devotee) mean that his time is not his own. Such has been the case with Bhante for the better part of his life as a practising monk. It has always been “devotees come first” no matter that he has no time to practise for his own salvation. It is rare indeed that a call from a devotee is ignored; even the whimpering of a stray dog has his ear or the mewing of a hungry cat has his immediate attention. He has been known to stop half-way in a Dhamma talk to enquire why a certain puppy is whimpering piteously in fear. “Please do not ill-treat the poor little puppy, for he has a wretched birth. Someone tried to drown the poor thing. Please treat it with compassion.” A dying fish in an artificial lily pond brings immediate action on his part to return all the fishes to the river and do away with the pond; all by himself!

The plight of a fellow monk in Yangon struck down with a stroke takes him immediately to that city to arrange for hospitalisation, up-to-date medical care and nursing. Further, on arriving home; organising medical funds for repatriation for the expenses of the sick monk. Many too are the Theravada meditation centres in Malaysia and Myanmar that have benefited from his advice and financial assistance when such centres were in the beginning stages of organisation. Needless to say that this list of beneficiaries is long.

In the period of his monkhood, a period of 21 years, the Venerable Bhante has given his time for the welfare of those who came to seek help and advice in the many facets of life experiences, from happiness to sadness, simple problems to problems of a more serious nature. Amongst his many memorabilia, throughout the years of his monkhood, that he will leave to posterity, are cassette tapes of his Dhamma talks in the Hokkien dialect. On these tapes are recorded various topics of Dhamma as expounded by the Buddha in His 45 years of ministry.

**“Sabbe sankhara aniccati”;** all compounded things are impermanent, as such and at such times when we are unable to hear the original Bhante Suvanno in the flesh speaking to us in his inimitable way, there will be available a new series of Dhamma books and cassettes in English, Hokkien and Mandarin, dedicated to his life’s work on the Path. Beginning with No.1 in this new series of Dhamma talks will be “The 31 Planes of Existence” and following will be such titles as “The Sixteen Dreams of King Pasenadi,” “The Story of King Vesantara,” etc. These Dhamma talks in Hokkien, currently on audio tapes, will be transcribed into English, edited and translated to Mandarin and eventually recorded onto CDs. This series will have a serial number for easy identification.

Since 1990, when he was 70 years of age, Bhante Suvanno had hinted that he would soon retire into seclusion. The conditions had never been appropriate enough for the event to happen; however as time passes by, he fully realises the urgency of concentrating on the true reason for his renunciation. “Mere acts of reverence cannot be deemed to honour, esteem, venerate and worship the **Tathagatha** rightly. Only the **bhikkhu** ... lay disciple who practises fully according to the Teachings, who is endowed with correctness in the practice of the Teachings and who lives with righteousness and truth, can be deemed to honour, esteem, venerate, revere and worship the **Tathagatha** in the highest degree.” In the eyes of Bhante Suvanno, the highest degree of veneration is to practise **Vipassana Bhavana**, as recommended by the Buddha.

In concluding this introduction to the new series of Dhamma books that are forthcoming, we on the editorial board conjoin our felicitations with all who

shared in making this **Dhammaduta** possible, financially and service-wise, by wishing: dear Bhante Suvanno,

*May safety and comfort in the Dhamma be your blessings, May good will and sincerity be your strength,*

*May mental and physical well-being be the twin pillars Of the bridge that takes you to the shore of Nibbana.*

*Jinavamsa,*

*October, 2001*

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## THE THIRTY-ONE PLANES OF EXISTENCE

*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa Homage to Him, the Exalted, the Worthy, the Fully Enlightened One*

I have been asked to repeat my talk about the 31 Planes of Existence which I had given some time ago. I did talk in general about that and there is also a chart that I had organised and it is appended here for your study. Today I shall explain each plane in detail so you can be clear on the matter. These may well be my last few Dhamma talks as it is my aspiration to pursue my goal of being a “nobody”; to retire into retreat and away from worldly pursuits. I believe that there are many of my Dhamma talks recorded on cassette tapes and if there is an opportunity, please listen to my tapes. If you feel depressed or sad, take out my tapes and listen to the message; it may help you to know and understand the Dhamma better.

It is my sincere hope that you will contemplate this Dhamma talk and understand the fearsomeness of hell. If you are constantly mindful of this, you will fear to do evil and if you do no evil and abstain from thoughtless actions you are on the correct path.

In this context, existence means life or living. Planes means realms, levels or worlds, places. In Pali the word “Loka” is a near equivalent, as the English language does not have an exact translation. We can say that these realms are as much places as they are mental states. For example, if your mind is evil, nasty or unwholesome and you are constantly following your mind’s will, then you are already living in the realm of hell. Furthermore, if you perform such unwholesome actions again and again without fear and without being mindful of the results, you will be reborn in a place of suffering: a hell realm. If you are honest, virtuous and your mind is pure and you constantly practise the wholesome acts of *dana*, *sUa* and *bhavana* (meditation) to develop your purity, then you are living in a heavenly state and are sure to be reborn in a clean, beautiful and pure place: a heavenly realm or even attain Nibbana. This cosmology and natural “law” applies to all beings, not just Buddhists, for such laws or

Dhamma are not inventions of the Buddha, but are natural and re-discovered by Him when He became Enlightened under the Bodhi tree.

One thing that we should remember is that all beings, without exception, living in the different realms are impermanent; they do not live forever. Some beings in the heavens can live for aeons but once they die in one realm, they will be reborn as another being in another realm, unless they have attained Nibbana - which means that they don't have to suffer or be reborn in any of these realms; they have achieved "non-existence".

The inescapable law of kamma guarantees that each and every one of our actions, whether it be of body, speech or mind, has consequences in line with the skilfulness or otherwise of that action. We can often witness this process first-hand in our own lives; the effects may not be immediately apparent. But the Buddha also taught that our actions have effects that extend far beyond our present life, determining the quality of rebirth after death: act in wholesome, skilful ways and you are destined for a favourable rebirth; act in unwholesome, unskilful ways and an unpleasant rebirth awaits. In our ignorance, we stumble for aeons through **samsara**, propelled from one birth to the next by the quality of our choices and our actions, not knowing where we shall end up next and unconsciously clinging to and craving for a better existence; rushing helter-skelter, as if blindfolded to join a speeding bullet train taking us to a destination we know not where. Compare this to a flock of chickens on the farm, happily scrounging for food, oblivious of the fact that at any time, one or any of its number will be picked up and slaughtered!

The suttas described 31 distinct "planes" or "realms" of existence into which beings can be reborn during their long wandering through **samsara**. These range from the extraordinarily dark, grim and painful hell realms all the way up to the most sublime, refined and exquisitely blissful heavenly realms. Existence in every realm is impermanent; in the cosmology taught by the Buddha there is no eternal heaven or hell. Beings are born into a particular realm according to both their past kamma and their kamma at the moment of death. When the kammic force that propelled them to that realm is finally exhausted, they pass away, taking rebirth once again elsewhere according to their kamma.

And so the wearisome cycle continues on and on into the deepest recesses of infinity.

In these 31 planes, eleven realms are dominated by the five senses, which includes our own human realm, six other realms occupied by **devas** and four realms of suffering. The lowest plane being hell, **niraya** and, in ascending order, the animal world, the world of the **peta** or hungry ghosts and the world of the **asura**; these are the planes of suffering where there is no opportunity to gain merits. Unfortunately these planes are the most populated, bursting at their seams with beings reaping the fruits of their past evil deeds. We must understand that in these four woeful planes, the most fearsome is hell, there being eight major hells, five minor hells and various sub-hells. In certain hell situations there is no let up of suffering for even one moment.

Going beyond these eleven are another sixteen realms of devas and gods of various classifications, and finally there are the four pure abodes of formless gods where the life span is so long that it appears to be timeless. Because of this length of time certain gods whose life spans are much longer than others have the idea that they are immortal, having seen so many others coming and going whilst they themselves are still around.

The Buddha further said that these 31 Planes of Existence exist not only in this universe but are found amongst millions of other world systems or universes. Every system or world has its 31 Planes of Existence. This unique universal truth was realised by the Buddha on His Enlightenment 2,500 years ago. It is perhaps worth mentioning that only the Buddha was able to discover this unique truth through the process of a method or discipline known today as **Vipassana Bhavana** (or Insight Meditation). Thus far no other religious teacher has been known to propound and teach this unique natural law. The Buddha further exhorted that to strive for the attainment of Enlightenment should be the ultimate goal of His students and disciples. Many of His disciples were able to achieve enlightenment during His ministry and one of the few notable ones, called An-uruddha, was able to confirm what the Buddha saw.

So how many world systems are there in all? The early Buddhist texts (*Nikaya*) sometimes talk in terms of “the thousandfold world system”, “the twice-thousandfold world system”, and the “thrice-thousandfold world system”. According to Buddhaghosa there are 1,000,000,000,000 world systems.<sup>1</sup>

Two thousand five hundred years ago the Buddha and His enlightened disciples had witnessed what today, science has just begun to discover: that there are other world systems, each with its life forms as are found in this vast universe.

Human beings who are ignorant of the Dhamma neither find the necessity to develop wholesome or good actions or deeds nor do they fear to do bad deeds. The Buddha was very clear. If beings do not do good deeds they will not accumulate merits, in which case in their next rebirth they are sure to be reborn into the world of hungry ghosts, animals or wandering spirits. If one disregards good deeds and only performs bad deeds, it is similar to one planting a tree with its root reaching right to the bottom of hell. Beings who advocate against good and wholesome deeds are very unwise: why? In a person who does not perform good deeds, the kammic energy he creates is unwholesome and at every rebirth he will find himself in one of the four woeful planes. It has been said by the wise that whatever seeds one sows, the fruits thereof shall one reap.

The Buddha has said that beings who had performed good deeds in previous existences would find rebirth in one of the twenty-seven planes including the human plane. These twenty-seven planes are known to be *sugati*, that is, in a happy world. The four woeful planes are known as *dug-gati*. These four woeful planes are really sorrowful as there will be no joy or laughter, only suffering.

Only human beings who regularly practise mental development and those in the habit of doing good deeds will gain merits to be reborn in one of the twenty-seven happy planes. Unfortunately, human beings make up the

<sup>1</sup> This view is supported in the book *Atlas of the Universe* by Patrick Moore, published by Cambridge University Press in the UK in 1998, *Life in the Universe* pp 206; in which is stated: There are 100,000 million stars in our Galaxy, many of which are very like the Sun; we can see 1,000 million galaxies, and it does not seem reasonable to believe that in all this host, our Sun alone is attended by a system of planets.

minority number here. Even in these **sugati** planes, some humans are laughing and some are crying. Some have plenty to eat and some go starving. Why do all these inequalities come about? All these are the results of kamma. In the final analysis, good things that happen to one; wealth, having enough to eat and wear, happiness and peace are due to the sowing of good seeds on fertile ground thus accumulating merits. “One cannot be reborn into any existence as one desires, but will fall into any one of the 31 planes of existence according to one’s past kamma.” (The Manuals of Buddhism **by Ledi Sayadaw**)

Ledi Sayadaw further states that: “Dispersion of life” after death is worse than death itself, for the four realms of misery down to the great “Avici” Hell stand wide open to a **puthujana** (a worldling who is ignorant of the Dhamma) who departs from the abode of men, like space without any obstruction. As soon as the term of life expires, he may fall into any of the **niraya** or realms of misery. Whether far or near on passing away, there is no intervening period of time. He may be reborn as an animal, as a **peta**, a wretched shade or as an **asura**, or titan, in the wink of an eye. The same holds true if he dies in the upper six realms of the **devas**. However, if he dies from the higher levels of **rupa loka** and **arupa loka**, there is no direct fall into the four realms of misery, but there is a halt of one existence either in the abode of men or in one of the six realms of the **devas**, wherfrom conditioned by his kamma and his unskilful actions in the human abode, he may yet fall into one of the four realms of misery.

In our experience in this existence, we know that some people are reborn into wealthy families and some into poor families. Some grow up in golden cradles and some sleep on gunny sacks on the floor. Some are tall or short, beautiful or ugly; some are stupid and some are intelligent. All these inequalities, the Buddha explained, are the results of the merits or demerits of the actions of **dana** and generosity done in our previous existences.

Giving dana, keeping of precepts and practising meditation are good wholesome deeds. If human beings practise these three good and wholesome actions they will stand very good chances of finding rebirth in happy planes.

These 31 planes are divided into three types of worlds:

1. *Kàma-loka* or *kàmabhava* (the sensuous world) - 11 planes
2. *Råpa-loka* or *råpabhava* (the world of form / fine material world) - 16 planes
3. *Aråpa-loka* or *aråpabhava* (the formless world / immaterial world) - 4 planes

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## KAMA-LOKA (THE SENSUOUS WORLD)

The sensuous world is finely divided into the following planes:

- a. *Kamaduggati*
- b. *Kamasugati*

A. *Kamaduggati Bhumi* — The Four States of Deprivation (apaya) are as follows:

- 1. *Niraya* (Hell)

These are realms of unimaginable suffering and anguish (**described in graphic detail in** Majjhima Nikaya 129 & 130). They should not be confused with the eternal hell proposed by other religions, since one's time here is, as it is in every realm, temporary. Unwholesome actions, murdering one's parents or an *arahant*, injuring the Buddha, or creating a schism in the Sangha, being quarrelsome and annoying to others are the ways to enter this region.

Human beings usually consider hell as being at the very bottom in the planes and often think that hell is inside a volcano or under the ground or the ocean but it doesn't have to be in any one place. Besides there are about a billion solar systems so why does hell have to be under the ground on earth. It could be anywhere and the heavens could be anywhere too, not just up in the clouds. We should try to visualise these realms more as states of being, not just places or up and down.

*Niraya*, the lowest level in the hell region, is a place of unimaginable torment. Totally devoid of happiness (sukha), only suffering (**dukkha**) is to be found here. In this life, if one does very harmful things, like killing, patricide or matricide, one will condition the mind to be negative and unwholesome. When passing away in this state of mind, one will surely find rebirth in this realm of great torment, joining other negative minded beings to suffer for a very long time. One must realise that one is not being punished by anyone; it's a natural process of cause and effect. Just as similar

grains of sand gather to form a beach and birds of a feather flock together, so do evil beings naturally attract and end up with other evil beings. The same natural “law” applies to all realms.

## 2. *Tiracchana Yoni* (Animals)

This realm includes all the non-human forms of life that are visible to us under ordinary circumstances: animals, insects, fish, birds, worms, etc. Behaving like an animal will get one to this plane.

The animal world is also not a pleasant place but often we think that it is. We look at birds flying in the sky and we say, “Ah, so beautiful, they are free and can go anywhere they want to.” Flying is not as easy as it looks. Imagine putting on a set of wings and trying to take off, could you keep your arms out-stretched for even five or ten minutes? Birds do it for hours, sometimes days! Besides, why are they flying around up there anyway? They’re not doing it for fun, they’re working. They’re searching for food or something to build their nests with, looking after their kids, and looking out for danger. Birds and animals are always afraid that someone or something is going to get them, so they live with fear and worry.

Animals’ lives are not so great; they have no choice but to search for food, fight and kill to stay alive. They must mark and guard their territory and then become hostile to intruders. We think that some animals are lucky, like house pets but are they really happy? Maybe they would prefer to be out in the wild or catching their own food; we don’t know. I know that they are dependent upon us and when we go away, they fret and worry. I once met a man who said that he wanted to be reborn as a lion, king of the jungle. I said that lions have to kill for their food and fight the other lions to continue to be the king; it’s not an easy life. Also, animals don’t have many options in life, they are bound and restricted by their environments, intelligence, and instincts.

## 3. *Peta Loka* (Hungry ghosts)

The next realm is that of the **peta**, often referred to as hungry ghosts. They wander hopelessly about in this realm, searching in vain for fulfillment. It is said that hungry ghosts have big, fat stomachs and tiny, little mouths. They

are never satisfied, always hungry and can never get enough to eat. So if people are very greedy and don't practise ***dana*** (sharing/giving), then they might become one of these beings. Sometimes people have pity for the ***peta*** because they can't do good deeds for themselves, so they try to help them by doing good deeds and sharing merits with them, particularly if they think that their departed relative may have been reborn as one.

Generally speaking, ghosts are the humans who have a very strong attachment to human existence or a particular place and although they are dead, they can't leave. I think that friendly ghosts exist in this realm too, the ones who have lost their way, or those who died suddenly and don't know that they're dead yet or who have "unfinished business" to do. For these "trapped" beings, ***metta*** (loving-kindness) from us will help them along; there's no need to be afraid of ghosts.

#### 4. ***Asura*** (Demons)

***Asura***, demons or titans are powerful and warlike but it seems that they don't harm humans. These demons, "titans" that dwell here are engaged in relentless conflict with one another. Some people are afraid of these beings but few beings can go from one realm to another. We can't become animals or just go and visit heaven or hell and come back again, neither can they. So do not be afraid, be friendly.

These four lower realms are unhappy or ***dukkha*** (suffering) realms. There is no chance to be good or to do good. When we do ***metta bhavana*** (loving kindness meditation) and we say, "May all beings be happy and peaceful, healthy and strong", it includes all of these beings too.

**B. *Kamasugati Bhumi*** — After the four woeful planes, there is the human plane and six other planes of heavenly gods, the highest of which is ***Paranimmita Vasavatti***, the abode of the gods who make others' creation serve their own ends.

#### 5. ***Manussa Loka*** (Human beings)

World of human beings. You are here (for now). Rebirth as a human being is extraordinarily rare (see *Samyutta Nikaya LVI.48*). It is also extraordinarily precious, as its unique mix of pleasure and pain facilitates the development

of virtue and wisdom to the degree necessary to set one free from the entire cycle of rebirths. The attainment of stream entry (*sotapatti*) guarantees that all future rebirths will be in the human or higher realms.

The human world has not only a mixture of **dukkha** and **sukha** but also **upekkha**, which means balance, neutrality or equanimity. Humans are found in many varied and extreme life situations. Some are born in poor villages or countries, without proper food, clean water, clothes, money, adequate sanitation etc. To these unfortunate people it's hell on earth; all **dukkha**. I assume that all of us here are average; we have good families, well fed and clothed, with children going to good schools. We're not rich, not poor and our lives have the normal ups and downs. Some are reborn as princes or princesses and have the best of everything; very little **dukkha** and lots of **sukha**. They live heavenly lives in this world. Only in this human realm is there pleasant and unpleasant, happy and unhappy, good and bad, and everything in between; therefore beings can only really understand the true nature of existence in the human realm. We can realise the imbalance of existence and endeavour to restore the balance, particularly in our own minds.

It is pointless to debate whether these realms are real or whether they are merely fanciful metaphors describing the various mind-states we might experience in this lifetime. The real message of this cosmology is simply this: unless we take steps to break free from the iron grip of kamma, we are doomed to wander aimlessly in **samsara**, with genuine peace and satisfaction always out of reach. The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path provides us with precisely the tools we need to break out of this cycle, once and for all, to true freedom.

## 6. **Cetumahdrdika** Heaven

**Devas** of the Four Great Kings, home of the **gandhabbas**, the celestial musicians, and the **yakkas**, tree spirits of varying degrees of ethical purity.

## 7. **Tvatimsa** Heaven

The Thirty-three Gods with Sakka (Indra) as their king, a devotee of the Buddha, presides over this realm. Many **deva.s** dwelling here live in mansions in the air.

#### 8. **Ydma** Heaven

**Yama Devas.** These **devas** live in the air, free of all difficulties.

#### 9. **Tusita** Heaven

World of contented **devas.** A realm of pure delight and gaiety. **Bodhisattas** abide here prior to their final human birth.

#### 10. **Nimmdnarati** Heaven

World of **devas** delighting in creation. These **devas** delight in the sense objects of their own creation.

#### 11. **Paranimmita-vasavatti** Heaven

World of **devas** wielding power over the creation of others.

These **devas** enjoy sense pleasures created by others for them. Mara, the personification of delusion and desire, lives here.

There are six **deva** realms included in this group. In other religions when they talk about heaven (only one), they are talking about this **Deva Loka.** Here, there is very little **dukkha**, it's mostly very pleasant. The beings here are not born as babies, they are already adults and they remain the same age until they die. There may be beautiful golden mansions with gardens and angels playing lovely music. There are documented cases where people have physically or clinically died, "left" their bodies (the rebirth process has already begun) and seen these heavens but meanwhile recover and have to "come back" to their bodies again. This is called a near-death experience, it's not strange, it's natural. A person might end up in these realms by following his religion correctly. Buddhists who practise **dana** (sharing), **sila** (morality) and **bhavana** (meditation), particularly **metta bhavana** (loving kindness) may be reborn in these **Deva Lokas.**

The luxuries and sensual pleasures enjoyed by the **devas** and **devis** in the six **Deva Lokas** are far superior to any human pleasures one can dream of. There are beautiful gardens and parks where **devas** and **devis** stroll about in an almost timeless period. Their dwellings are mansions nestling gently among verdant green foliage and beautiful pleasant lakes where crystal clear waters give them a sense of peace and calmness.

The jewelled mansions where **devas** reside are created by their own good kamma. All **devas** look as if they are 20 years old, and **devis**, 16. They never age; they remain youthful and beautiful all their lives. They consume only celestial food so their bodies produce no excreta. **Devas** and **devis** have different **kusala kamma** and so some are better looking than others, naturally their mansions too are of different grades according to their **kusala kamma**.

All these divine abodes are full of sensual pleasures and are fully enjoyed by the celestial beings, so much so that they do not find the necessity to meditate or to keep their precepts. Thus there is no possibility of doing good or practising the Dhamma or meditation in these **Deva Lokas**. Passing away on exhausting their **kusala kamma**, and not having accumulated further merits in these **Deva Lokas**, they are sure to descend into one of the four woeful planes. To be reborn into the **Deva Lokas** or celestial planes is not a great comfort as we see clearly that there are many dangers and hindrances towards spiritual progress. To the unwary these are likened to booby traps.

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## RUPA-LOKA, FORM REALMS (THE FINE MATERIAL WORLD)

The following are the different planes of **devas**:

12. **Pdrisajja Brahma**

Retinue / servants of **Maha Brahma**.

13. **Purohita Brahma**

Ministers / advisors of **Maha Brahma**. Beings in these planes enjoy varying degrees of jhanic bliss.

14. **Mahd Brahma**

Great **Brahmas**. Two of this realm's more famous inhabitants are the Great **Brahma**, a deity whose delusion leads him to regard himself as the all-powerful, all-seeing supposedly creator of the universe (see Digha Nikaya 11), and Brahma Sahampati, who begs the Buddha to teach Dhamma to the world.

15. **Parittdbha Deva**

**Devas** of Limited Radiance.

16. **Appamndndbha Deva**

**Devas** of Unbounded Radiance.

17. **Abhassara Deva**

**Devas** of Streaming Radiance.

18. **Parittasubha Deva**

**Devas** of Limited Glory.

19. **Appamdnasubha Deva**

**Devas** of Unbounded Glory

**20. *Subhakinna Deva***

**Devas** of Radiant Glory

**21. *Vehapphala Devu***

Very Fruitful **Devas**, they enjoy varying degrees of jhanic bliss.

**22. *Asanna Sattd***

Mindless beings, only body is present; absence of **sauna cetasika**.

**23. *Aviha Deva***

**Devas** not Falling Away. They live their full life span.

**24. *Atappa Deva***

Untroubled **Devas**. They are not troubled by the five hindrances.

**25. *Sudassa Deva***

Beautiful **Devas**. They have magnificant/ beautiful body forms.

**26. *Sudassi Deva***

Clear-sighted **Devas**. They see things with ease.

**27. *Akanittha Deva***

Peerless **Devas**. Beings who become nonreturners in other planes are reborn here, where they attain arahantship.

In these sixteen planes there are no females, all are males and when one is reborn there one becomes a male and there is no attachment or emotion because there is no sex, no greed and all sensuous feelings are non-existent. They are very peaceful beings and they live very pure lives, free from all thoughts of sensual pleasures. In their existence as humans they had preferred the solitude of meditation in quiet places away from town centres, cities, houses, villages and monasteries, remote from worldly and sensual pleasures.

Most religions teach that there is one God who creates everything and is the ruler of all. In Buddhism, we don't say that there is just one God but we say that there are many gods, in many godly realms. Buddhists don't pray to or worship any of these beings. Remember that it is very rare that beings can go from one realm to another; in the same way, the gods don't rule over humans, they rule over the heavens. The Gods and divine beings, not having achieved Enlightenment, still have pride and ego and like to have large retinues or attendants. Thus most religions form around the belief that there are eternal and omnipotent beings that create and rule over everything and everyone. Buddhists don't live in the shadow of or obey any beings with selfish pride. Everyone has the power to become enlightened, which is greater than mere godly status. The beings in the heavenly realms have very fine material bodies, they can go anywhere; they just think where they want to be and they are already there, as in the imagination or in a dream.

These realms are accessible to those who have reached at least some level of attainment in their meditation and who have thereby managed to eradicate hatred and ill-will to some extent, though not all. They are said to possess extremely refined bodies of pure light. The only way to reach this plane is through the practice of meditation. There is no need for illumination in this plane, as all beings here are beautiful and radiant in different degrees and their faces shine brilliantly, lighting up the surrounding area. This plane is called the ***Rupa*** world where ***Brahmas*** live.

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## ARUPA-LOKA, FORMLESS REALM (THE IMMATERIAL WORLD)

The highest in these realms, the Pure Abodes (28-31), are accessible only to those who have attained to “non-returning”, the stage of arahantship. It consists of four realms that are the abodes of those who pass away while meditating in the formless *jhanas*. This is the purest of the 31 planes of existence.

### 28. *Akdsdnahcdyatanupaga Deva*

Sphere of Infinite Space.

### 29. *Vihhanahcdyatanupaga Deva*

Sphere of Infinite Consciousness.

### 30. *Akihcahhdyatanupaga Deva*

Sphere of Nothingness.

### 31. *Nevasahhdndsaahhdyatanupaga Deva*

Sphere of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception. The inhabitants of these realms are possessed entirely of mind. Having no physical body, they are unable to hear *Dhamma* teachings.

**Arupa** means no bodily form at all; having no material body and possessing mind only, beings in these realms do not feel physical *dukkha*. Life here is very pleasant and extremely long. One may be reborn in such a realm by practising strong and deep absorption concentration meditation techniques. These states are very pure and having become adept at entering into these states one may, upon death, choose to die in this state and be reborn in such a realm. However this is not to say that one should aspire to be born in this realm, as the primary objective of meditation taught by the Buddha is to attain Nibbana, and that can only be through *Vi-passana Bhavana* (meditation), the Buddha said.

The Fine-Material World and the Immaterial World together constitute the “heavens” (sagga).

All this information is not really important if you want to attain enlightenment. It's just an interesting subject that many people like to philosophise over. But the Buddha's teaching is not merely a philosophy; it is a practice, a blueprint for blissful living. As we have just mentioned, **Vipassana Bhavana** is the only way to Enlightenment and to achieve the goal of the Buddha's teaching. For this to happen we need to practise diligently.

In the rounds of **samsara** that beings go through, regardless of the plane they live and die in, the process of being reborn, getting old, sick, dying and being reborn again had been tediously timeless. All beings undergo these processes many times in as many Great **Kappas**. What is a kappa? The Buddha explained that a **kappa** is likened to an enormous piece of rock that is seven miles long, seven miles wide and seven miles deep in dimension. A **Deva**, once in one hundred years, taking a piece of very fine cloth, rubs it, till it is no more. This is the length of time of one **kappa**. We could have been reborn many times in this Great **Kappa**. (Manual of Abhidhamma, Ch.5 & Note V.1)

In their ignorance and delusion, beings go through their unending cycles of rebirths repeatedly, without contemplating the sufferings they have experienced in **samsara**. In their delusion they believe that they are having great enjoyment in their lives and thus at each rebirth they crave to be reborn again and again, even though some of their rebirths are in the planes of animals, hungry ghosts or sometimes as gods in the heavenly realms.

In our repeated cycles of rebirth, many Buddhas have passed through, and we have sometimes met with the Buddha and sometimes not. The Buddha has said very clearly that there are as many Buddhas in the many Great **Kappas** as there are pebbles along the two thousand miles of the banks of the River Ganges. So lengthy a time and with so many opportunities, yet the greater number of humans have not awakened to the realities of the horrors of rebirths.

In their ignorance and delusion, the Buddha said, human beings are unable to realise and remember any single vestige of the sufferings they had experienced in their previous existences, and in their deluded cravings for and clingings to sensuous pleasures they are inevitably reborn to a world where their cravings, clingings and kamma take them. Human beings, especially, have experienced so many losses of loved ones in their many existences that the tears they have shed are more than all the waters of the oceans in this present world. Yet they are desirous of rebirth.

The Buddha also said that humans are normally desirous of doing unwholesome deeds rather than wholesome deeds. When they are about to die, in the last death moment when they see that they are going to be reborn into one of the four woeful planes, only then are they repentant and pray to be reborn into the human world. That is then too late!

The Buddha had often said that to be born as a human being is a very rare feat. One of His disciples then asked the Buddha how rare was the occasion, and to give an example for clarification. The Buddha said:

*“Monks, suppose that this great earth were totally covered with water, and a man were to toss a yoke with a single hole therein. A wind from the east would push it west, a wind from the west would push it east. A wind from the north would push it south, a wind from the south would push it north. And suppose a blind sea-turtle were there. It would come to the surface once every one hundred years. Now, what do you think? Would that blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole?”*

*“It would be a sheer coincidence, lord, that the blind sea-turtle, coming to the surface once every one hundred years, would stick his neck into the yoke with a single hole.” (Majjhima Nikaya 129.24)*

*“It’s likewise a sheer coincidence that one obtains the human state. It’s likewise a sheer coincidence that a **Tathagata**, worthy and rightly self-awakened, arises in the world. It’s likewise a sheer coincidence that a doctrine and discipline expounded by a **Tathagata** appear in the world. Now, this human state has been obtained. A **Tathagata**, worthy and rightly self-*

*awakened, has arisen in the world. A doctrine and discipline expounded by a **Tatha.gata** appears in the world.”*

*“Therefore your duty is to contemplate: ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress. This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.’” (Samyutta Nikaya LVI.48)*

So it is the same in our repeated rebirths. We are ignorant and hold many wrong views, and because of these we have done many wrong and unwholesome deeds. In the many lifetimes that we passed through **samsara** we may have by chance met with the **Buddha sasana** once or twice at best, at which time we may know the Truth. We are repeatedly reborn into this world where the strong will destroy the weak and the intelligent will despise the not so intelligent. The world we are born in is a very materialistic world and sensuous desires are very corrupting.

To be reborn as a human being is already a very rare occasion, to be reborn as a human being in a **Buddha sasana** with the knowledge to practise the Dhamma is much more singular and unique. Maybe once in a thousand rebirths are we able to be so fortunate as to have that happen to us, as explained by the Sayadaws Ledi and Mahasi. There are also times when there will not be a **Buddha sasana**. These then will be very bleak times indeed.

In our repeated rebirths, the Buddha said, we carry with us many wrong views. In some rebirths we are against the Buddha’s teaching. Sometimes in our meditation or when we are chanting, our subconscious shows up and we find that we have antagonistic thoughts of the Buddha. These thoughts are not of our own thinking but due to the wrong views that we may have held in the **Buddha sasana** in countless previous lifetimes.

We sometimes find some young persons and even matured persons with very unruly and destructive behaviour, even with the things they profess to love. This is because of the results of unwholesome actions accumulated through many lifetimes, rising from the depths of their sub-conscious in this present lifetime, characterising their every word and action. These results of past unwholesome actions cause much suffering and give rise to defilements which colour their present deeds. What are these defilements?

They are greed, anger or hatred and delusions. Because of these defilements their words and actions will be tainted. Some speak with barbs in their words and some act without restraint.

Most importantly, we must be aware and mindful of the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. Not to be associated with an entity such as 'I', 'me' or 'mine', all these 'I's; 'I' am so and so; 'my father is so and so'; all these are very strong egoistic references to self, and the Buddha has called this '*sakkaya-ditthi*', the wrong view of self. 'I' drives 'I' to perform unwholesome action that will cause endless suffering to 'I'. Thus the most important goal of the meditator or yogi in meditation is to destroy this false concept of 'I'. If one does not have the wrong view of 'I', one does not place importance on 'I'. Example:

Noticing some beautiful floral arrangements, one may wish to commend those responsible for arranging those flowers so beautifully. When addressed thus, the person who did the job, if of a strong self-centred personality will probably remark that it was he or she who did the job. 'I did it, it was all my own work.' The one without wrong views of 'I' will probably say 'This is my first attempt and is not good. So-and-so taught me the work, you should see her arrangement. It really is very good.'

Comparing the two individuals, one with strong view of self and the other not so, you can see which speech is more hurtful to the ears of the one who hears. Pride of self concept can be very dangerous and harmful, and it can lead to misunderstanding and conflict of egos.

Mahasi Sayadaw and Ledi Sayadaw have said that those who understand the nature of suffering and are knowledgeable of the Dhamma, fear the results of unwholesome actions and will refrain from doing anything of that nature. Those who are not knowledgeable of the Dhamma are not exempt from the sufferings resulting from unwholesome actions. If their excuse is that, since they do not know about the Dhamma they should not be affected due to their ignorance, they are sadly mistaken, because what the Buddha taught are universal laws and will affect everyone - whether one is aware of it or not.

There are those that hear the Dhamma but still continue to do their unwholesome actions. These are people that are asking for trouble. Just imagine those that leave this hall today, as they go out they will have to pass through railings on the left and right. One group knows that the railings are burning hot, another group does not. Those that know will, of course, not touch the railings, but those that don't will grab the railings and thereby get themselves burnt badly. In the eyes of the law, ignorance of the law is not a valid defence. Pleading guilty will, of course, draw a lighter sentence.

If we are ignorant in this existence, we must not go on being ignorant in our next existence. We should work towards gaining knowledge in this present existence. Once we have found the Truth in this existence, we shall have continuity of knowledge of the Truth in our future existences. We have mentioned that the Buddha has said that it is a rare feat to be born in the time of a **Buddha sasana**! We are very lucky in deed to be born in this **Buddha sasana**, where we are exposed to His Teachings, but unfortunately, very few will be able to discern the Truth of the Dhamma. Even so, those few that listen and practise the Dhamma will find a better rebirth for themselves and we shall be very happy for them.

Those who are ignorant will not make any attempt to know and practise the Dhamma. It is very unfortunate, as they do not even know how to keep the Five Precepts. It is also pitiful that some are only able to keep the Precepts once, at the beginning of the year! And do nothing wholesome the rest of the time. They expect good results will be theirs because of this once-in-the-year precept keeping. These poor people are cheating themselves. These people are not serious in wanting to do good and to purify their minds. Those who are serious will prepare themselves days ahead of the actual day they are taking precepts. It does not mean that one keeps the precepts on certain days and not on other days. No! One must keep the Precepts every day, with mindfulness! Keeping the Five Precepts well daily will, the Buddha has said, enable one to be reborn in a happy plane.

The way to a better rebirth and happy plane of existence is by observing the precepts, doing good deeds, performing **dana** and practising **Vipassana Bhavana**. Do not view wrongly that the performance of **dana** is a very simple

action. It is possible to do ***dana*** only if one has the opportunity and the means.

It is not by chance that we are able to hear this Dhamma and be together with all our Dhamma friends today, but by the accumulated merits of wholesome actions done presently or in our past existences. One's meeting with a knowledgeable or good Dhamma friend is also due to accumulated merits of good practices such as ***dana*** and meditation. If one has not performed such wholesome deeds one will not be able to have merits to warrant such good, fortunate, meetings. Some people wanting to and even being invited to hear the Dhamma, might not be able to do so due to not having performed wholesome deeds, ***dana*** or meditation to warrant the good results. They have missed the boat due to ignorance and not having performed wholesome deeds.

It is of utmost importance to observe the precepts, practice meditation, perform ***dana*** and other good deeds of a selfless nature, without any expectations of material gains. The results of such deeds of different kinds will result in different benefits. Even when we have attained to the top of the happy planes, there is no guarantee that we are safe from future sufferings. Depending on our merits, we can still have defilements which, if we are not mindful of them, will lead us to the lower planes of existence. We have to be constantly mindful to guard the entrance to the six sense doors in order to be aware of our actions.

One we hear the Dhamma and practise meditation, we will be mindful of the sensuous desires arising from our six sense doors. Once we are mindful we will know the evil of the concept of 'I'. We will be able to meditate and see 'rising and falling' with clarity. From then on deep insight will be attained, and hopefully we may reach the first stage of arahatship, known as ***sotapanna***. We must renounce the wrong view of self and become selfless.

However, there is no certainty that anyone will be reborn into the happy planes. Many instances have been documented and talked about by various authorities and ordinary people in what they themselves believe are near-death experiences. They have described what they have seen, which

corresponds with other unrelated instances: description of guardians of the hell realms and the tremendous heat there are so similar, and experienced in different spans of time and places, as to exclude any form of collusion.

Many people do not want to hear the realities of the realms of hell because they are fearful of the uncertainties of hell. Is it real or is it superstition? They are full of anxieties and doubts, they choose to ignore the facts, believing in the edict 'ignorance is bliss' or due to a guilty conscience over dark matters deep in their minds. These are fatalistic people who only see the negative side of any situation. They fail to realise that the beginning of fear can lead to wisdom; the wisdom to stop doing unwholesome actions and start doing good.

All beings reap the fruits of the seeds they sow and are given rebirth by and according to their kammic results. No deity of any sort controls the birth and death of any beings. It is only their kammic energies that condition the rebirth of beings. The good or bad kamma will determine the happy or suffering planes that they will find rebirth in. Make haste to do good, check your mind for evil. If one is not energetically doing good, one's mind will subconsciously be thinking of evil thoughts. The mind has a tendency to gravitate towards unwholesome thoughts, and if one were to let it alone it would start looking for dirt. Refrain from evil deeds. Should one be contemplating unwholesome thoughts, now is the time to stop. One should not find pleasure in evil; brush off even a simple act of evil. Buddha says there will be painful suffering if one does not stop contemplating doing unwholesome deeds.

In the process of performing good deeds, the thoughts of evil or unwholesome actions will not enter one's mind. When the merits of one's good deeds ripen, one will enjoy great happiness.

A lot of people do not want to believe that there is hell. They want to believe that hell is only a concept. If a person commits any crime he will be arrested by the authorities and be punished, and that is all there is to it. There is no such thing as atoning for committing bad deeds when on your deathbed. Some people may use this excuse to assuage their conscience. As an answer and consolation to their sufferings, they will find various reasons

for their happiness; they will believe that happiness is what they have achieved on their own. With their achievement and money they believe they can have what they desire. This happens in any age and time. One such instance is given in the following paragraph:

In the time of the Buddha, there were four very wealthy men. They were so rich they did not know what to do with their money. So they decided to use their wealth in the pursuit of sensuous pleasures with women. They would look for beautiful women, marry them and, having become tired of them, would pay them off and get rid of them. If they were not able to marry them, these four men would kidnap and rape them, and then pay them off. They were able to get away with these atrocities because of the circle of sycophantic cronies their wealth attracted, who were able to keep them out of trouble if caught by the authorities. Thus they used their wealth to buy themselves out of trouble in their present lifetime, but how would they possibly fare reaping the results of these unwholesome deeds in their future existences?

In the four woeful planes of existence too, beings have the five senses: they see, hear, smell, taste and touch. However, their faculties can only be conscious of suffering! Their existence in the lower planes has suffering as the sole objective, there is no occasion for happiness, sense of pleasure, recreation or performance of any deeds that cause happiness. Beings here are also unable to choose to do good, hence they do not have any opportunities to accumulate merits. Their consciousness is only for suffering. They cannot choose to do one iota of good! They can only suffer, so much suffering that the Buddha said: "...it is hard to find a simile for the suffering in hell."

Even so, the Buddha gave the following simile: "Suppose **bhikkhus**, men caught a robber culprit and presented him to the king. and the king said: "go and strike the man in the morning with a hundred spears." And they struck him in the morning with a hundred spears. Finding him still alive in the afternoon, the king ordered that he be struck again with a hundred spears and again in the evening. "What do you think, **bhikkhus**? Would that man experience pain and grief because of being struck with three hundred spears?" the **bhikkhus** replied in the affirmative... "So too, **bhikkhus**, the pain

and grief that the man would experience because of being struck with the three hundred spears does not count beside the suffering of hell; it is not even a fraction, there is no comparison."

The Buddha further elaborated on just a fraction of the fruits of evil deeds:

*"Now the wardens of hell torture him with the fivefold transfixing. They drive a red-hot iron stake through one hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other hand, they drive a red-hot iron stake through one foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through the other foot, they drive a red-hot iron stake through his belly. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

*"Next the wardens of hell throw him down and pare him with axes. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

*"Next the wardens of hell set him with his feet up and his head down and pare him with adzes. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

*"Next the wardens of hell harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth across burning ground, blazing and glowing. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

*"Next the wardens of hell make him climb up and down a great mound of burning coals, blazing and glowing. There he also feels painful, racking and piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

*"Next the wardens of hell take him feet up and head down and plunge him into a red-hot metal cauldron, burning, blazing and glowing. He is cooked there in a swirl of froth. And as he is being cooked there in a swirl of froth, he is swept now up, now down, now across. There he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings. Yet he does not die so long as that evil action has not exhausted its result.*

“Next the wardens of hell throw him into the Great Hell. Now as to that Great Hell, **bhikkhus**:

**It has four corners and is built With four doors, one set in each side,**

**Walled up with iron and all around And shut in with an iron roof.**

**Its floor as well is made of iron And heated till it glows with fire.**

**The range is a full hundred leagues Which it covers all-pervasively.**

Yes, hell is very real indeed. It can be likened to a huge furnace, flames shooting out from all sides including top and bottom. Doors lead to and from this furnace like chambers. There are altogether eight chambers. The flames are constantly burning and there is no switch to shut off the flame and the tremendous heat. Ledi Sayadaw, who is known to be very advanced in his practice, says that those beings in hell have their bones, nerves, flesh, heart, lungs, brains etc. burning hot, and the skins are so hot that flames shoot out from them. In hell they will remain for hundreds of thousands of years, even millions of years or trillions, decillions of years.<sup>2</sup>

There they will remain experiencing sufferings. There are many beings in hell, just like mustard seeds packed into a bamboo tube.

“**Bhikkhus**, I could tell you in many ways about hell. So much so that it is hard to find a simile for the suffering in hell.” (Majjhima Nikaya 129.7; **for more descriptions of the results of wrong deeds, see Visudhimagga I.156**)

Thus said the Buddha: the suffering in hell is great indeed. Being forewarned by no less a person than the Buddha, we humans have the good fortune to be able to choose our course of action in this present existence, to determine in a big way the degree of happiness or suffering in our future existences.

Ledi Sayadaw has explained all this very clearly. He further said that, ‘among the beings in this world, all have a myriad of evil kamma in them’. We have in us to a greater or lesser extent, conditioned by actions of previous existences, residues or accumulated defilements of anger, greed and

<sup>2</sup> trillions = 1 followed by 18 zeros; decillions = 1 followed by 60 zeros.

delusion and we may not understand the true Dhamma, as we may not have been in contact with a **Buddha** sasana!

During our long stay in the hell regions, we have been conditioned by many unwholesome characteristics which stay with us in our rebirth in the human existence. Some babies when they are born are badly behaved, they cry for anything, they throw tantrums very often and even to the extent of throwing away their milk bottles! They need supervision constantly and they need attention all the time. Some are really well-behaved and obedient. Why the difference? Those that are unruly have been reborn after a lengthy period in hell, after being in hell and in constant sufferings, they have been conditioned accordingly. Human life span is between seventy to a hundred years, compared to the life span of the different levels of hell that some beings are freed from. Due to their good kamma ripening, they are now reborn in the human plane.

The most important consideration is that we must not succumb to evil actions or deeds, otherwise we will find ourselves in the hell regions. Once we are in hell all the unwholesome actions will create the right conditions and opportunities for bad kamma to arise. So evil kamma after evil kamma will arise.

In certain cases, having passed away one goes to hell, having then passed away while in hell, one may be reborn again and again in hell or other woeful states for many existences. All our actions and deeds, though unseen by anybody, or any agencies, will never escape the effects of kamma. Kamma will take us to the many existences that are our just desserts. It has no distinctions or preferences. Our deeds and actions are known by kamma and in due season will reward us with what is due. Even kings, emperors, gods, devas, beggars and humans and all beings are answerable to their kamma.

By the same token if in our lifetime we have performed wholesome deeds, kamma will be responsible to see that good things come to us. Kamma will see to it that at the appropriate time just rewards will come to us, in the present life or in lives to come. The right conditions must prevail to reap what we have sown.

Ledi Sayadaw has said that all the unwholesome deeds done by human beings are mostly due to delusions we harbour, and these delusions can only be eradicated by meditation. When we meditate we will realise the non-existence of 'I', me, you or mine. Once we have realised that, most of the delusions will not arise in us, in which case we will have attained **sotapatti**, the first step towards our final goal. Once we pass away in this stage, we will not be reborn into any woeful states and we will assuredly be reborn as a human, not an ordinary human, but an intelligent human!

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**Samsara** is a Pali word which means the cycle of existences. It is based on life, death and rebirth and the chain of cause and effect. Because we die with desire, aversion and confusion, we can't let go of life; this tenacity propels us into a new existence according to the quality of our minds at the time of death. This death moment determines the nature of the next existence and so we may be reborn into a pleasant or unpleasant existence. We are reborn with a pre-existing disposition or inclination, which explains why we all have individual characters right from birth. The Buddha fully understood the natural way that beings constantly perpetuate their own sufferings from life to life. He taught that if we could completely purify the minds of selfish attachment we would be self-liberated and experience the peace and freedom of Nibbana (enlightenment), the cessation of suffering and the end of rebirth, the end of **samsara**. For to be reborn again and again is to experience untold suffering and misery. For the Buddha asked:

*“Which is greater, the tears that were shed from existence to existence while wandering this **samsara**, crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing, or the waters in the four great oceans?”*

The Buddha gave the answer that the tears shed were truly greater.

*“Long have you repeatedly experienced the death of a mother. The tears you have shed over the death of a mother while wandering this long, long **samsara**, crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being*

*separated from what is pleasing, are greater than the waters in the four great oceans.”*

*“Long have you repeatedly experienced the death of a father... the death of a brother... the death of a sister... the death of a son... the death of a daughter... loss with regard to relatives... loss with regard to wealth... loss with regard to disease. The tears you have shed over loss with regard to disease while wandering this long, long time, crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing, are greater than the waters in the four great oceans.”*

*“Why is that? From an inconstruable beginning comes birth. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are being reborn repeatedly. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries, enough to become disenchanted with all fabricated things, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.” (Samyutta Nikaya, Part II, XV.3)*

This brings us to the question: how enduring is **samsara**; is there a beginning and does it end? Is it eternal or not eternal?<sup>3</sup> These selfsame questions and others were contemplated by the monk Malunkyaputta, and he went to the Buddha with the intention of getting an answer from Him or else he would not continue being a monk (Majjhima Nikaya 63). The Buddha refused to give him an answer but rather declared that He could not see any conceivable point where the beginning was and the ending thereof.

To render a simile of the timelessness of **samsara**, He turned to the group of monks He was addressing and enquired of them which they thought was greater: the mother’s milk they had drunk in the course of their long travels in **samsara** or the waters of the four great oceans of the world. He stated that the mother’s milk they had drunk was the greater, thus demonstrating the lengthy duration of **samsara**.

Therefore it would appear that we have wandered in **samsara** from birth to death, from death to rebirth, again and again for so great a number of aeons

<sup>3</sup> A group of astronomers stated in The Early Universe, a paper in the Atlas of the Universe that they worked out a theory to be called the continuous-creation or steady-state theory, in which they picture the universe as having no beginning and never coming to an end; there is an infinite past and an infinite future.

that should we have been conscious of it we would surely have stopped doing so. He further said to Malunkyaputta why He had not made known the answers to those questions: “And why, Malunkyaputta have I not made known the answers to your questions? Because it is not beneficial and does not belong to the fundamentals to leading a holy life, it does not lead to dispassion and disenchantment, to cessation, to peace and to Nibbana. Thus have I not declared it to you.” The Buddha knew many things but He did not want to burden people with unnecessary knowledge that did not serve to lead them to Nibbana.

Why do we wander in **samsara**?

*“It’s because of not understanding and not penetrating four things that you and I have wandered on for such a long, long time. Which four? Suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering (ie. the Noble Eightfold Path).”*

*“But when noble virtue is understood and penetrated, when noble concentration, noble discernment, noble release is understood and penetrated, then craving for becoming is destroyed; the guide to becoming (craving and attachment) is ended; there is now no further becoming.”*  
*Therefore, the ending of **samsara** is the attainment of the state of Nibbana, cessation of all suffering.*

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## TABLES (31 REALMS)

### Formless Realms (*aråpa-loka*)

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(31) Sphere of Neither-perception-nor-non-perception ( <i>nevasaññānāsaññāyatatanupaga deva</i> )	The inhabitants of these realms are possessed entirely of mind.	Fourth formless jhāna
(30) Sphere of Nothingness ( <i>ākiñcaññāyatatanupaga deva</i> )		Third formless jhāna
(29) Sphere of Infinite Consciousness ( <i>viññānañcāyatatanupaga deva</i> )	Having no physical body, they are unable to hear Dhamma teachings.	Second formless jhāna
(28) Sphere of Infinite Space ( <i>ākāsanañcāyatatanupaga deva</i> )		First formless jhāna

### Form Realms (*råpa-loka*)

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(27) Peerless devas ( <i>akaniñtha deva</i> )		
(26) Clear-sighted devas ( <i>sudassī deva</i> )		
(25) Beautiful devas ( <i>sudassa deva</i> )		
(24) Untroubled devas ( <i>atappa deva</i> )		
(23) Durable devas ( <i>aviha deva</i> )	These are the five Pure Abodes ( <i>suddhāvāsa</i> ), which are accessible only to ( <i>anāgāmī</i> ) and arahants. Beings who become non-returners in other planes are reborn here, where they attain arahantship.	Fourth jhāna

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(22) Mindless devas ( <i>asannasatta</i> )	Only body is present, no mind.	Fourth jhāna
(21) Very Fruitful devas ( <i>vehapphala deva</i> )		
(20) Devas of Radiant Glory ( <i>subhakiṇṇa deva</i> )		Third jhāna (higher degree)
(19) Devas of Unbounded Glory ( <i>appamāṇāsubha deva</i> )	Beings in these planes enjoy varying degrees of jhanic.	Third jhāna (medium degree)
(18) Devas of Limited Glory ( <i>parittāsubha deva</i> )		Third jhāna (minor degree)
(17) Devas of Streaming Radiance ( <i>ābhassara deva</i> )		Second jhāna (higher degree)
(16) Devas of Unbounded Radiance ( <i>appamāṇābha deva</i> )		Second jhāna (medium degree)
(15) Devas of Limited Radiance ( <i>parittābha deva</i> )		Second jhāna (minor degree)

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(14) Great Brahma ( <i>Mahā brahma</i> )	Two of this realm's more famous inhabitants are the Great Brahma, a deity whose delusion leads him to regard himself as the all-powerful, all-seeing creator of the universe (see DN 11), and Brahma Sahampati, who begs the Buddha to teach the Dhamma to the world.	First jhāna ( <i>higher degree</i> )
(13) Ministers of Brahma ( <i>Brahma-purohitā deva</i> )	Beings in these planes enjoy varying degrees of jhanic.	First jhāna ( <i>medium degree</i> )
(12) Retinue of Brahma ( <i>Brahma-pārisajjā deva</i> )		First jhāna ( <i>minor degree</i> )

## The Sensual World (*kāma-loka*)

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(11) Devas Wielding Power Over the Creation of Others ( <i>paranimmitavasavatti deva</i> )	Only body is present, These <i>devas</i> enjoy sense pleasures created by others for them. <i>Māra</i> , the personification of delusion and desire, lives here.	
(10) Devas Delighting in Creation ( <i>nimmānarati deva</i> )	These <i>devas</i> delight in the sense objects of their own creation.	
(9) Contented devas ( <i>tusita deva</i> )	A realm of pure delight and gaiety. <i>Bodhisattas</i> abide here prior to their final human birth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(refer to 'What Buddhists Believe' by K. Sri Dhamma-nanda)</li> </ul>
(8) Yama devas ( <i>yāma deva</i> )	These <i>devas</i> live in the air, free of all difficulties.	
(7) The Thirty-three Gods ( <i>tāvatimsa deva</i> )	Sakka (Indra), a devotee of the Buddha, presides over this realm. Many <i>devas</i> dwelling here live in mansions in the air.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generosity</li> </ul>
(6) Devas of the Four Great Kings ( <i>catumaharajika deva</i> )	Home of the <i>gandhabbas</i> , the celestial musicians, and the <i>yakkas</i> , tree spirits of varying degrees of ethical purity.	

REALMS	COMMENTS	Cause of Rebirth
(5) Human beings ( <i>manussa loka</i> )	You are here (for now). Rebirth as a human being is extraordinarily rare (see SN LVI.48). It is also extraordinarily precious, as its unique mix of pleasure and pain facilitates the development of virtue and wisdom to the degree necessary to set one free from the entire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The development of virtue and wisdom.</li> </ul> <p>The attainment of guarantees that all future rebirths will be in the human or higher realms.</p>
(4) Demons ( <i>asura</i> )	The demons "titans" that dwell here are engaged in relentless conflict with one another.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>refer to 'What Buddhists Believe' by K. Sri Dhammananda)</li> </ul>
(3) Hungry Ghosts ( <i>peta loka</i> )	Ghosts and unhappy spirits wander hopelessly about this realm, searching in vain for fulfilment.	
(2) Animals ( <i>tiracchana yoni</i> )	This realm includes all the non-human forms of life that are visible to us under ordinary circumstances: animals, insects, fish, birds, worms, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ten unwholesome actions.</li> <li>Behaving like an animal.</li> </ul>
(1) Hell ( <i>niraya</i> )	These are realms of unimaginable suffering and anguish (described in graphic detail in MN 129 and 130). Should not be confused with the eternal hell proposed by other religions, since one's time here is – as it is in every realm – temporary.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ten unwholesome actions.</li> <li>Murdering one's parents, murdering an arahant, injuring the Buddha, or creating a schism in the Sangha</li> <li>Being quarrelsome and annoying to others.</li> </ul>

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